THE THRALDOM OF MODERN ART.

SIR,—As your correspondent "Amateur" still remains unconvinced that the study and purchase of old paintings and sculptures are prejudicial to progress, we attempt finally to put our arguments into as concise a form as possible, hoping, should they be just, to prompt a resolve in the minds of some of your numerous readers to discourage by all means in their power a taste based on no criterion but habit, and an expenditure of wealth at once unwise and unjust.

The artist and the public are overawed by the spectral monster of antiquity which has been evoked. Is the present race a race of pigmies? have men over the space of two or three thousand years shrunk in stature? has the intellect become feeble? Modern science gloriously refutes such notions: what was the strength of Hercules and all the Grecian athletæ, compared with the gigantic powers of modern times, which wrestle with the storm? or the mysteries of the Pythagoreans, compared with the simple truths by which the mariner traverses the desert of waters? In the arts alone, let it be said with shame, have modern times cringed like cowards to antiquity.

The question that deserves the most earnest consideration is this—What criterion have we that the highest excellence has been attained in Greek and Italian art? The unqualified approbation of successive ages since their production is no positive evidence, for numerous fallacies have passed current through generations, exploding at length under the influence of those minds which accept nothing as golden truth till carefully assayed in the furnace of the understanding:—such intellects cannot rest satisfied till the premises have been diligently examined, on which their opinions are based. If may at first excite wonder that fallacies should remain so long unchallenged, unrefuted,—yet surprise abates when we reflect on the powers which education and habit have to aid and perpetuate almost any absurdity to the prejudice of reason, and of common sense. Consider what the system of education has been, and even now too often is—the communication of results rather than reasons, teaching the scholar merely to assert opinions, without giving him at the same time any criterion by which to test their truth: it is, in fact, only knowledge on "hear-say." If there is any one department of education in which this bad system prevails more than another, it is in art. Ancient examples are abundantly placed before the artist and the public; they are exhorted to believe in them; vision receives them as assertions of grandeur, beauty, and perfection; a rational perception of the truth or falsehood of the assertions is not possessed by the master, much less by the scholar, least of all by the public, which obtains its notions indirectly. With all, the admiration of ancient art is more the admiration of habit and fashion than of appreciation: when a clear and rational perception is possessed that it is not the *neplus ultra*, then will it be rivalled, for every artist must have felt that it is not difficult to execute when his aim and knowledge are precise; it is not so difficult to do as to know what to do: to know what to do is the experience which is most valuable, and it is precisely on this point that the relics of ancient art are dumb. We cannot see nature with other eyes than our own: if the spectacles of the old masters be placed before healthy eyes vision will be impaired; their constant use at last compelled. To possess the experience of others is doubtless a great boon; this can be acquired in two ways,—by oral tradition or written precept: the former is more to be desired, for books cannot answer all interrogations: there is, however, an experience self-earned more valuable than either. Phidias had a greater than Phidias to instruct him.

It may be urged by some, that the criterion of judgment is innate and spontaneous, but this is contradicted by our every-day experience. Men have to be accustomed, drilled into the admiration of ancient art. We are told that old pictures, old sculpture, old architecture, ought to be placed before the public till it be impossible to avoid them: it is said by these means it will be taught to appreciate; this we doubt: it will conform to surrounding influences, to which it will become accustomed by habit. This would equally be the result if Hindoo, Egyptian, or Chinese were substituted for Greek and mediæval art.

If there is any authority on which the public might be tempted to rely, from which it might be induced to take its opinions on trust more than any other, it would be the artist. He is, however, under the control of the same law of habit which reconciles nature to that which at first appears repugnant and totally foreign to it.

Italian art is not so far removed from the present age, but that the painter may, by the dint of study, force himself to mock the condition of mind of which it was the offspring. Still, this condition of mind is but an imitation, and the result of working under such influence—this assumed condition—is worse than imitation. The faith of the nineteenth is very different from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: we speak especially of England. It is far more difficult, however, if not impossible, for the artist, at this distance of time, to assimilate with Greek feeling, Greek habits of thought. He acknowledges Grecian art to be still a mystery, yet he blindly worships it, and continually exhorts others to do the same. It must be evident, then, that he will never be able to work in the same vein until it ceases to be mysterious; never will he be certain of its excellence till he possesses some other criterion than itself, whereby he may decide whether the tendency of Greek art is worthy of pursuit.

The more immediate evil of expending money on the productions of a past age is this, that it limits the purchase of modern works. If the sum of fifty or sixty thousand pounds,* disbursed for this purpose, had been spent in commissioning artists, partly in instructing the public on the principles of art, can there be a doubt in any mind as to which would have been the most effective in its results, as regards the promotion of taste and development of the painter, sculptor, and architect? If thirty artists are brought into the field of competition, there is the probability in favour of more talent being compassed in that thirty than in the ten or twenty which existed previously; and an increased demand would certainly have the tendency to increase the number of the profession.

In conclusion, we would urge our fellow students to doubt all their opinions, to dissolve the covenant which they have entered into with prejudice to protect them; leave opinion alone to stand or fall in the contest with reason,—if strong, it will be stronger in victory; if weak, it will die conquered, and will soon be forgotten.

W. C. THOMAS.

FALL OF A SUGAR-HOUSE IN GLASGOW.

THE cause of the failure of the sugar-store between Alston-street and Hope-street, Glasgow, by which at least thirteen men have lost their lives and many have been injured, seems still a matter of great doubt. As nearly as we can ascertain, the sugar-house must have been about forty-five years old. About thirteen years ago a builder was employed by the proprietor to support the joisting and beams, as they had shewn symptoms of giving way. The property was then secured by means of red pine pillars, taken up alongside the original supports, and on these, beams were thrown across, upon which the floors rested. The sugar-house remained in this state till about the year 1843, when, whether from an extension of business, requiring additional weight to be placed upon the floors, or whether from the decay of the timbers (which in such premises may be rendered less durable by the extreme heat employed in the manufacture), it was considered necessary to renew the principal part of the carpenter's work in the building. At that time the whole interior part of the building was taken out, when new beams and joisting, supported by strong iron pillars, were fitted up. In fact, the greater part of the building, with the exception of the four external walls, was renewed.

The Lord Provost has stated that there is no truth in the report that the building had been condemned eight years ago: on the contrary, he believed the proprietors, up to Saturday night, were under the impression that the building was in a more secure state than what it had been in for a long time previous. He also stated that the weight in the house was, he understood, much less than usual—about 50 tons, he believed; and so confident were the proprietors of the safety of their premises, that they were in the process, should the business have gone on as usual, of taking in a great many tons additional.

We have instituted a private inquiry into the matter, with the hope of obtaining for our readers some useful information.

* We believe we are considerably under-estimating the total amount of sales of old pictures this year.

THE ARCHITECTURAL MONUMENTS OF INDIA.

IT is much to be desired that a faithful account of the architectural monuments of India should be obtained. Such things have been little cared for or thought of there, but we have indications that a better feeling is growing up. The *Delhi Gazette*, in the course of an article on the subject, mentions as one instance of this, that the paper on the "Ancient Buddhist Architecture of India," read by Mr. James Fergusson, before the Institute of Architects, last session, has been reprinted from our pages, in the Indian *Pic-nic Magazine*.

The Archæological Society of Delhi have recently passed the following resolution:—

"That a recommendation be submitted to the Government of India, to add to the survey of the district of Delhi, about to be instituted, a commission, to consist of a competent archæologist, and a draughtsman of acknowledged acquirements, to examine the whole of the ancient buildings, sites, inscriptions, &c., at present in existence in the southern pergunnah of Delhi; and that, if the results of the labours of the commission be such as to warrant their extension, other parts of the Upper Provinces be examined in a similar manner."

The *Delhi Gazette* observes upon this:—

"While Rajpootana has its Tod, Guzrat its Wathen, while Cunningham, Ellis, and others have described the ruins of Malwa, Bundelkund, &c., and even distant Affghanistan has been ransacked of its antiquarian stores by H. H. Wilson and another Cunningham still more indefatigable, Delhi, that should have been the first to attract attention, has remained almost a blank, and the exquisite and singular specimens of its architecture, its several Hindoo and numerous Mahomedan monuments, its inscriptions, &c., are all but unknown, in the antiquarian sense of the word, though they have for many years been objects of wonder to the traveller in search of the curious; but even he can only see and admire them frequently, without knowing what they really are. It is still a matter of dispute with some even at Delhi, and with cotemporary writers, whether the Kootub Meenar is a Mahomedan or Hindoo structure; the sites of the fourteen or fifteen towns of Delhi, Seeree, Kelokeree, Jehanpunnah, Feerozabad, Toglukabad, Mahomdabad, &c. &c., that have followed each other in such rapid succession, are, with one or two exceptions, almost wholly unexplored; the numerous tombs of the great men who figured in the annals of by-gone years, are seen without our knowing precisely whose memory they are really intended to commemorate, and the splendid works, planned to fertilize the surrounding country, and defend its salient points, are as a sealed book, merely because we have not taken the trouble to open it as we might have done long since."

"We have already deeply to lament, in the past archæological history of India, the irretrievable loss of many objects of very great antiquarian interest, that have been allowed to perish entirely, or to deteriorate so much as to be hardly available for the purposes of the minute researches now proposed. We may here take the opportunity of alluding in particular to those splendid architectural remains around the Kootub Meenar, which, had they formerly received that attention they were so justly entitled to, would not now be in a state verging on absolute ruin, and of adding that, if nothing be done to preserve at least the memory of those that still exist, they, too, will disappear from the scene of their grandeur, without a record of their existence beyond the passing, and very frequently fanciful, sketches that the curiosity or admiration of travellers have induced them to commit hastily to paper.

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